

An Examination of Matthew 16:14-20

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Assessment B

Essay & Source Focus

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The following essay will explore interpretation and meaning for a specific passage within the Bible. It will examine Matthew, chapter sixteen, verses fourteen to twenty, which describes an interaction between Jesus and Simon Peter. The chapter will be included for reference and will be taken from the New King James Version (NKJV).¹ Individual verses will be discussed by considering varying interpretations, as well as their implications.

It will look at Jesus' beliefs of Simon Peter, the relevance of appointing Simon with the name Peter, Simon Peter's recognition of Jesus, and the reasoning associated to Jesus' desire for secrecy of identity.

Comparison will also be included between alternative versions of the chapter, prompting the inclusion of other perspectives. In comparing differing opinions, it will attempt to understand the basis on which these are formed. It will also include a brief account of the missions of Peter, showing his commitment following the passing of Jesus.

Matthew 16:14-20

14 So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.²

¹ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible* (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020).

² *ibid* pp. 1415-1416.

Interpretation of Biblical text can be difficult to agree upon when considering which source is being used. In the NKJV³ and many others, chapter 16 verse 18 reads as,

I will declare unto thee, "Thou art Peter, and I will build my church upon this rock, and the doors of hell shall not prevail."

Whereas in The Message, the text reads,

"You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out."⁴

The text from The Message suggests that Peter is seen as 'a rock', a stable element, which Jesus will use to form his church.⁵ There is, however, no indication of this in the NKJV text.⁶ The implication in The Message,⁷ seems to be that the name Peter, which is derived from the Greek '*petros*' meaning stone or rock, is describing Peter as the foundation.⁸ This is in contrast to Mulligan's views, in which Peter is described as an innately weak man, endeavouring to be strong for Christ, a foolish man who longs to be wise, and a frightened man attempting to be brave; sometimes successfully and sometimes not.⁹

³ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible* (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020).

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2011), p. 807.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible* (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020).

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2011).

⁸ Online Etymology Dictionary (2024), <<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=Peter>> [accessed 20 November 2024].

⁹ Mackenzie Mulligan, *Simon, Who Is Called Peter: Life as One of the Apostles* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

Name changes within the Bible are significant, with many examples such as Abram to Abraham (father of multitudes) Sarai to Sarah (mother of nations) Jacob to Israel (let God prevail). Peter being the only disciple to be awarded a change of name, promotes a sense of noteworthy consideration by Jesus, which seems to set him apart from the other disciples.¹⁰ Peter is also the only disciple that Jesus addresses by name in all four gospels and the only individual that he prays for.¹¹ There are two occasions when Jesus called Peter by Simon after changing his name.¹² It is worth noting that the name ‘Simon’ comes from the Hebrew ‘Shim’on’, which means harkening or hearing.¹³ It has been suggested that the use of the name Simon on these occasions were Jesus’ way of highlighting the importance of hearing his words.¹⁴

Another notable aspect of the chapter is Simon’s recognition of Jesus as ‘Christ, the Son of the Living God’. When others were questioning who Jesus really was, Simon revealed his recognition of Jesus without reservation, and it seems apparent that Jesus felt this realisation had been provided to Simon through God rather than what Simon had learnt through others.¹⁵ This gives the impression that Jesus saw Simon as someone who listened to their own heart and would remain true.

¹⁰ E.C Messenger, *Catholic Answers* (1993) <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-addition/simon-the-petros> [accessed 21 November 2024].

¹¹ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible* (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020).

¹² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 2 Peter and Jude* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2005).

¹³ Online Etymology Dictionary (2024), <<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=Simon>> [accessed 20 November 2024].

¹⁴ John F. MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men: How the Master Shaped His Disciples for Greatness, and What He Wants to Do with You* (Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2002).

¹⁵ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible* (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020).

Historically, Peter's dedication seems to be mostly recorded as affirming what Jesus saw in him. Peter appears to have been bound in the words of Jesus, '...and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven...', demonstrated by his endeavours to continue spreading the teachings.¹⁶ His mission to teach Gentiles of God's forgiveness to the repentant, seems to confirm his understanding of what Jesus meant by, '... and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'¹⁷ This conveys the impression that Peter wanted to save souls on earth so that they would not be lost to heaven. Another possible interpretation of this is that Jesus was explaining to Peter that if you loose your bad ways on earth, your entry into heaven will not be hindered. When looking at a modern day understanding of Peter, there is an overwhelming sense that Peter is one of the more relatable characters. Someone who has taken the time to reflect upon his former lifestyle and one who really 'hears' Jesus' message.¹⁸

In verse twenty of the chapter, Jesus commands his disciples not to disclose his identity. It has been suggested that this command was given as Jesus did not want to disclose himself publicly as the Messiah before beginning to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies.¹⁹ Jesus knew that the Jew's impression of the Messiah was one of a warrior that would lead them into battle against Rome's oppression, and that they would not recognise him as their saviour without these attributes. It was more important for Jesus to get his message out and felt that it may be overshadowed by the Jew's misunderstanding of his true identity. His mission was to change the people's perspective of the Messiah as someone who would restore the nation with his teaching of God's love and forgiveness.²⁰

¹⁶ ibid pp. 1415-1416.

¹⁷ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible* (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020).

¹⁸ Michael Card & Brennan Manning (Foreward), *A Fragile Stone: The Emotional Life of Simon Peter* (Madison: Inter Varsity Press, 2003).

¹⁹ BBC, *The Identity of Jesus – CCEA: Messiah* (2024) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zjrr2sg/revision/2> [accessed 29 November 2024].

²⁰ Mark J. Keown, *Understanding Mark's Gospel: Tyrannus Textbook Series* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2021).

As observed in the chapter, Simon Peter appears to be a particularly significant figure in relation to the decisions Jesus made surrounding the development of his ministry. Peter, remaining true to Jesus' teachings, continued to share his faith devotedly, emerging as a leader within the discipleship. It was Peter who was responsible for electing a new disciple in place of Judas who had betrayed Jesus to the Romans.²¹ Peter also shared the message of God to the Gentiles with the justification that God had told him to not look upon them as unclean. He took the message outside of Israel and began spreading the word to places such as Rome and Turkey. He used the persecution of Christians to example how through faith, everyone can be born again into a new hope through Jesus' return as King. He also reminds them of Jesus' teachings in opposition to violence, and to not retaliate against their oppressors, but instead to love their enemies as Jesus had taught.²²

Jesus' insight into what Simon Peter could become, as first displayed in Chapter sixteen, provided the world with someone who could take his teachings far and wide, to communities which may have not been otherwise considered. Peter's apostolic missions finally led to the primacy of the papacy, some claiming Peter to be the first Roman Bishop and possibly the first Pope.²³

²¹ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible: Acts: 1-12* (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020).

²² Bible Project, *Book of 1 Peter Summary: A Complete Animated Overview* (2017) <<https://youtu.be/WhP7AZQIzCg?si=0wQH6f-WgsspZxuv>> [accessed 30 November 2024].

²³ Ralph G. Wilburn, *The Prophetic Voice in Protestant Christianity* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

It seems evident that there are many variables present which make it difficult to establish defined interpretations of the text, with new versions of the text from various sources offering new meaning and understanding. However, what appears to remain a constant is how we view the understanding Jesus had of Peter. It can be agreed that Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter, yet depending upon which version of the text is available to you, the reason for this remains debateable.

Read alone, the text in question can generate many questions for the reader, such as why Jesus wanted to keep his identity secret. It seems that a full understanding of much of the text can only be gained by furthering one's knowledge of subsequent texts. However, the text does provide a sense of being a pivotal moment in the life of Peter, which could be a reason for its renown.

As mentioned, the reader's view of the text remains subjective, not only in relation to which version of text is read, but also when considering personal bias and basis for understanding. The example given regarding Jesus' advice to Peter about heaven and earth may result in many contrasting explanations from one reader to the next and have different meaning at various times in the reader's life.

What can be stated without argument, is that the text offers an opportunity for the reader to discover their own beliefs.

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